

THE HOLY LAND EXCURSION.

LETTER FROM "MARK TWAIN."

[SPECIAL TRAVELLING CORRESPONDENT OF THE ALTA.]

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**A Financial Problem—Italian Extravagance—
Absorption of Church Property—The Govern-
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Splendid Poverty—The Italian Priesthood
—Description of a Princely House of
Cheek—A Gorgeous Tomb—A Blast at
Abuses and Extravagances.**

ABROAD IN ITALY, July, 1867.
The Works of Bankruptcy.

There are a good many things about this Italy that I don't understand—and more especially I cannot understand how a bankrupt Government can have such palatial railroad depots and such marvels of turnpikes. Why, these latter are as hard as adamant, as straight as a line, as smooth as a floor, and as white as snow. When it is too dark to see any other object, one can still see the white turnpikes of France and Italy; and they are clean enough to eat from, without a table-cloth. And yet no tolls are charged.

As for the railways—we have none like them. The cars slide as smoothly along as if they were on runners. The depots are vast palaces of cut marble, with stately colonnades of the same royal stone traversing them from end to end, and with ample walls and ceilings richly decorated with frescoes. The lofty gateways are graced with statues, and the broad floors are all laid in polished flags of marble.

These things win me more than Italy's hundred galleries of priceless art treasures, because I can understand the one and am not competent to appreciate the other. In the turnpikes, the railways, the depots and the new boulevards of uniform houses in Florence and other cities here, I see the genius of Louis Napoleon, or rather, I see the works of that giant imitated. But Louis has taken care that in France there shall be a foundation for these improvements—money. He has always the wherewithal to back up his projects; they strengthen France and never weaken her. Her prosperity is genuine. But here the case is different. This country is bankrupt. There is no real foundation for these great works. The prosperity they would seem to indicate is a pretence. There is no money in the Treasury, and so they enfeeble her instead of strengthening. Italy has achieved the dearest wish of her heart and become an independent State—and in so doing she has drawn an elephant. She has got nothing to feed it on. Green in government, she plunged into all manner of useless expenditure, and irretrievably swamped her treasury almost in a day. She squandered millions of francs on a navy which she did not need, and the first time she took her new toy into action she got it knocked higher than Gilderoy's kite.

How to Fill an Empty Treasury.

But it is an ill-wind that blows nobody good. A year ago, when Italy saw utter ruin staring her in the face and her greenbacks hardly worth the paper they were printed on, her Parliament ventured upon a *coup de main* that would have appalled the stoutest of her statesmen under less desperate circumstances. They, in a manner, confiscated the domains of the Church! This in priest-ridden Italy! This in a land which has groped in the midnight of priestly superstition for sixteen hundred years! It was a rare good fortune for Italy, the stress of weather that drove her to break from this prison-house.

They do not call it *confiscating* the church property. That would sound too harshly yet. But it amounts to that. There are thousands of churches in Italy, each with untold millions of treasure stored away in its closets, and each with its forty-horse teams of lay priests to be supported. And then there are the estates of the Church—league on league of the richest lands and the noblest forests in all Italy—all yielding immense revenues to the Church, and none paying a cent of taxes. Why, bless me, in some great districts the Church owns all the property—lands, watercourses, woods, mills and factories. They buy, they sell, they manufacture, and since they pay no taxes, who can hope to compete with them?

Well, in effect, the Government has just gobbled all this, and will yet gobble it in rigid and unpoetical reality, no doubt. Something has got to be done to feed a starving treasury, and there is no other resource in all Italy—none but the riches of the Church. So the Government is going to seize a great portion of the revenue arising from priestly farms, factories, etc., and is also going to take possession of the churches and run them itself. In a few instances it will leave the establishments of great pet churches undisturbed, but in all others only a handful of priests will be retained to preach and pray, a few will be pensioned, and the balance turned adrift. As concerns the latter, it is said that God will take care of them—but of course that is only matter of opinion.

Ecclesiastical Splendor.

Now suppose you glance at some of these churches and their embellishments, and see whether you think the Government is doing a righteous thing or not. In Venice, to-day, a city of a hundred thousand inhabitants, there are twelve hundred priests. Heaven only knows how many there were before the Parliament got after them. Now there was the great Jesuit Church. Under the old regime it required sixty priests to run it—the Government runs it with five, now, and the others are discharged from service. All about that church wretchedness and poverty abound. At its door a dozen hats and bonnets were doffed to us, as many heads were humbly bowed, and as many hands extended, appealing for pennies—appealing with foreign words we could not understand, but appealing mutely, with sad eyes, and sunken cheeks and ragged raiment, that needed no words to translate. Then we passed within the great doors, and it seemed that the riches of the world were before us. Tall, huge columns carved out of single masses of marble, and inlaid from top to bottom with a hundred intricate figures wrought in costliest verde antique; pulpits of the same rich materials, whose draperies hung down in many a pictured fold, the stony fabric counterfeiting the delicate work of the loom; the grand altar brilliant with polished facings and balustrades of oriental agate, jasper, porphyry, verde antique, and other rare marbles and precious stones, whose names, even, we seldom bear, and never see, save in jewels and the sumptuous ornaments of patrician drawing-rooms—and slabs of priceless lapis lazuli lavished everywhere as recklessly as if the church owned a quarry of it. In the midst of all this magnificence, the solid gold and silver furniture of the altar seemed cheap and trivial. Even the floors and ceilings were worth the price of a dukedom. To estimate the moneyed value of all the splendors around us there, would have annihilated my arithmetic beyond redemption.

Now, where is the use of allowing all that cash to be gouged out of a community by the ten thousand stratagems so deftly played by these priests, while half of that community hardly know, from day to day, how they are going to keep body and soul together? And, where is the sense in permitting hundreds upon hundreds of millions of francs to be locked up in the useless trumpery of churches all over Italy, and the people ground to death with taxation to uphold a perishing Government?

As far as I can see, Italy, for fifteen hundred years, has turned all her energies, all her finances, and all her industry to the building up of a vast array of wonderful monuments of human folly, and starving half her citizens to accomplish it. She is to-day one vast museum of magnificence and misery. All the churches in San Francisco put together could not buy the jewelled trumpery in one of her hundred cathedrals. And for every beggar in San Francisco, Italy can show you ten thousand—and rags and vermin to match. It is the loneliest, princeliest land on the face of the earth.

Look at the grand Duomo of Florence—a vast pile that has been sapping the purses of her citizens for five hundred years, and is not nearly finished yet. Like all other men, I fell down and worshipped it, but I had it in me to burn it down if I had a chance. When the filthy beggars swarmed around me I grew savage, and said, "Curse your indolent worthlessness, why don't you rob your church?"

It takes three hundred flabby, greasy vagabonds in holy orders to run this awful ecclesiastical swindle. And they don't stand a watch worth twenty dollars a month. They begin dinner at noon and gorge till 3; then they smoke, and swill, and sleep till 5, and then they come on watch for just two hours.

I saw one of their performances. Sixty of them singing and talking Latin at once. And I say in all seriousness that the majority of them looked stupid, and brainless, and sensual beyond anything I have seen for many a day. Those fat-cheeked, sleepy-eyed, bull-necked fellows, may have been good men—of course I cannot say they were not—but their general build was better suited to a butcher shop than a cathedral. Whenever you see a Catholic priest in America, you can pretty safely set him down as a man of brains—as a man of ability and intelligence, away above the average of men—but when you see one in Italy you can as safely set him down as altogether the reverse. It seems so to me at any rate, and I certainly could not conveniently jump out of a third-story window without mashing a priest or a soldier, one or the other. Both are plenty enough.

A Blast on General Principles.

And now that I have got my temper up, I might as well go on and abuse everybody I can think of. They have got a grand mausoleum in Florence, which they built to bury our Lord and Saviour and the Medici family in. It sounds blasphemous, but it is true, and here in this godly country they *do* blasphemy. The dead and damned Medici villains, who cruelly tyrannized over Florence and were her curse for over two hundred years, are stowed away in a circle of princely vaults, and in their midst the Holy Sepulchre was to have been set up. The expedition sent to Jerusalem to steal the Sepulchre missed fire and got into trouble and could not accomplish the burglary, and so the centre of the mausoleum is vacant now. They say the entire mausoleum was intended for the Holy Sepulchre, and was only turned into a family burying ground after the Jerusalem expedition failed—but you will excuse me. They would have roped in some of those Medici, sure. What they hadn't the cheek to do was not worth doing. And they wouldn't even have been content to sleep around the outside of the Sepulchre, those dead Medici—they would have got up and climbed in. Say nothing about cheek when you are talking about that family. Why, they had their trivial, forgotten exploits on land and sea pictured out in grand frescoes (as did the ancient Doges of Venice) with the Saviour and the Virgin Mary throwing bouquets to them out of the clouds, and the Deity himself applauding from his throne in Heaven! And who painted these things? Why, Titian, Tintoretto, Paul Veronese, Raphael—none other than the world's idols, the "old masters."

Andrea del Sarto glorified his princes in pictures that must save them forever from the oblivion they merited, and they let him starve. Served him right. Raphael pictured such infernal villains as Catherine and Marie de Medici loafing around in Paradise and hobnobbing familiarly with the Virgin Mary and the angels, (to say nothing of higher personages,) and people abuse me because I am so bitterly prejudiced against the old masters that I cannot see any beauty in their productions. It makes me perfectly savage to look at one of those pictures. I cannot help but see beauty in one of their pictures now and then, but I keep on despising the groveling spirit that could persuade those masters to prostitute their grand talents to the disgusting adulation of such monsters as the French, Venetian and Florentine Princes of two and three hundred years ago, all the same.

More Magnificence.

But somehow, I cannot keep that gorgeous Medici mausoleum out of my head. It is as large as a church; its pavement is rich enough for the pavement of a King's palace; its great dome is splendid with frescoes; its walls are made of—what? Marble?—plaster?—wood?—paper? No. Red porphyry—verde antique—jasper—oriental agate—alabaster—mother of pearl—chrysolony—red coral—lapis lazuli! All the vast walls made wholly of these precious stones, worked in, and in and in together in elaborate patterns and figures, and polished till they glow like great mirrors with the pictured splendors reflected from the dome overhead. And before a statue of a dead Medici reposed a royal crown that blazed with diamonds and emeralds enough to buy a city, almost. These are the things

the Government has its evil eye upon, and a happy thing it will be for Italy when they melt away in the public treasury.

And now—However, another beggar approaches. I will go out and destroy him, and then come back and write another column of vituperation.

MARK TWAIN.